An ancient Greek proverb, found in the sentences of Menander, asserts that "sea and fire and woman are thrice evil." The proverb exemplifies a tendency in the ancient world to see women as the root cause of mankind’s miseries, a tendency also witnessed in for example the Greek myth of Pandora or the Hebrew myth of Eve. Proverbs and myths are genres that naturalize categories and pass value-judgment on them, but especially myths can also be used to challenge...
entrenched values. A myth is successful only if it is continually retold and reengaged with, and yet every retelling opens the way to subtly alter the fabric of the myth, and thus also the categories being negotiated. Written myths are furthermore susceptible to changes from one manuscript to the next, as textual critics have learned to their chagrin in the search for Urtexts. Scholars engaged with textual fluidity, on the other hand, see divergent manuscripts as an opportunity to compare the different readings elicited in each manuscript. A text that attains the status of canon is however less vulnerable to textual fluidity (but by no means immune), and the main tool to modify the categories negotiated in the text becomes the commentary, or the apocryphal elaboration.

The book of Genesis is one such text that has spawned innumerable commentaries and apocrypha, a number of which is contained in the Nag Hammadi Codices. In the present contribution—offered here in homage to Professor Antti Marjanen—I will consider a myth dealing with somewhat similar categories as those in the Greek saying, namely women, angels (incidentally often described as igneous), and the dangerous knowledge they reveal, in the reception of a biblical myth in late antique Egypt. On the subject of women, angelic or demonic beings, and knowledge, it is the myth of Eve, the snake, and the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that has received the most attention, both in the apocrypha of the Nag Hammadi Codices and the scholarly literature. However, another myth deals with a later stage of antediluvian history.

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2 I am particularly influenced here by Bruce Lincoln, e.g., Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
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